

States of Emergency
Patricia Zimmermann, 1998
NAMAC Conference Keynote Address

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Dedicated to Leslie Schwartz Burgevin (1958-1998)

This talk is dedicated to my good friend, Leslie Schwartz Burgevin, a visionary curator and arts advocate at the Johnson Museum of Art in Ithaca, New York. Leslie died this past February after a long, 20 year fight against cancer. I think she would have liked what I am going to say today.

This is for you, Leslie.

TO FLOURISH IN DEFENCE

First, I would like to thank the National Association for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC) national board for inviting me to speak, especially Helen De Michiel, Charlie Humphrey, and Karen Khan. And I would like to thank the audience for coming here today, this early in the morning. It is a great honor for me to speak to you today, for I speak as someone who is, quite literally, in awe of the incredible work you in the media arts field do to sustain a viable, dynamic media arts culture that carves out some place for public culture in these terribly privatized times. I am deeply grateful, too, because I have benefited directly and indirectly from all of your work. I am not an arts administrator, or a festival director, or a museum curator, a foundation officer, a distributor, a community video access person, or even a media artist. I see all of you as the vanguard, the front-line troops as it were, blazing a trail through the amazing art practices, debates, and work pushing through our cultural lethargy. Against all that says no to public culture, you all provide space for it to flourish in defiance. Your cultural work opens up ideas for me,

Arts Conference even when all I can do to participate is read the massive amounts of brochures and flyers that you flood my mailbox with. Your work leads me to artists that I and other writers and scholars want to think about, teach, write about. You make me feel less alone in the quickly corporatizing academy. You give me hope.

EMERGENCY: THINKING ABOUT MEDIA ARTS

The title of my talk is "States of Emergency." I use the plural - states- to suggest that we are currently not in the midst of one, easy to understand state of emergency, but in a multi-layered complexity comprised of many states, as in states of the union from New York to Ohio to Montana to Texas to Utah. But it is also many states, as in conditions of engagement. I use this term "states" to suggest--perhaps in an invocation of feminist thinking originating in the 1970s--states of consciousness or unconsciousness, words I marshal not to describe a medical or drug-induced condition, but rather invoke to describe our level of political and social/historical analysis. Thus, States of Emergency. I would argue that these States of Emergency in the end don't have all that much to do with state, federal or foundation funding, although part of it certainly does. States of Emergency as I am using it has much more to do with what I see as a state of emergency in how we think about media, media arts, arts practices. Given the current state of affairs and the globalization engulfing us, we need completely new, risky epistemologies--a fancy, perhaps overly theoretical word for thinking about thinking, for the

structure of knowledge-that can account for the complexities of our current era and aggressively imagine ways to carve out some public space in it. There is, then, a state of emergency in how we think. And compared to procuring \$100,000 operating budgets from non profit agencies for our programs, new thinking is so much easier to come by if we can just let go and reimagine the universe.

Fixating too much on funding or defunding the arts infrastructures deletes the vivid histories of organizations that thrived without any support at all during the 1950s and 1960s: The Flaherty Seminar, Cinema 16, Art in Cinema, to name just a few. These organizations did not simply invent ways to survive and get resuscitated, which is language more appropriate perhaps to hospital cardiac units. More importantly for our discussion here, they imagined the future, which meant, quite simply, unsettling and rewiring the universe with every program, every idea, every event. And this rewiring, we now know from historical reclamation projects by scholars, meant thinking differently all the time.

As that great champion of independent media Erik Barnouw once told me, this rewiring meant knowing that the most important thing a media event can do is "boil over." By that term, Barnouw meant that what is repressed in our culture and our politics and our lives can come out furiously in a public way, boil over the confines of the pot, get people talking and energized, create conflict out of which can emerge change. I don't know about you, but it is a rare event where any "boiling over" of any kind happens. Right now, where on my campus almost any debate and controversy about almost anything is framed as impolite, loud, and above all to be averted, I would be happy with a tow simmer of any kind. Somewhere, someplace, there must be room for a unofficial, samizdat culture of hope where things can "boil over."

HISTORIES OF CIVIL WARS

Historically, we have all been engaged in this civil war against difference and public culture for at least ten years. Although, to be accurate, its origins should be located in the early years of the Reagan administration's attacks on politically engaged documentaries like *From the Ashes: Nicaragua Today and El Salvador, Another Vietnam in 1981*. For example, my entire professional life in media arts and critical writing over the last twenty years has been flogged by arts defunding, political attacks against people like me or my friends, embattled infrastructures, and the end of public space. The privatization is so bad that in my home state of New York, garbage in state parks has even been privatized. We now have to carry out our trash ourselves. I don't like the overused term culture war, with its high culture, elitist connotations, because we are not simply embattled over culture as art production, but over social, historical, economic, and political shifts and reorganizations of absolutely monumental scope. The entire globe is being reorganized and reengineered. The entire globe-as well as the entire media arts field in every country-is up for sale like cheap real estate.

We can map how bad it is when the Hollywood transnationals see economies of scale by producing feature films in places racked by nationalist genocide like Bosnia or places where the transition from communism to neoliberalization and the free market has left national film industries either in ruins or dead, like Russia, Hungary, Poland. The vultures are no longer circling the corpses, but eating them. We just happen to live in the United States, but similar trends of defunding and privatization can be discerned in China, Western and Eastern Europe,

Latin America, Canada. We are therefore poised on a crumbling, frightening precipice as we edge into the enigmatic morphing media landscapes of the 21st century. Therefore, I prefer the term civil war rather than culture wars, language coined by neoconservatives like Newt Gingrich, Hilton Kramer, Congressman Danenmeyer and their buddies. We don't want them framing what is our debate. I think civil war is much more applicable: we are, of course, fighting about borders, about North/South divides across the globe, about the place of genders, races, sexualities, regional identities, and the differently abled within the reordered white nation, about annihilation of difference and heterogeneity-not just of people, but of a whole range of places, spaces, and practices. We have been engaged in this civil war about who and what will survive and who will define the nation for so long that our energies are flagging. There is now a whole generation of students and new media arts professionals and artists who do not even see this situation as a crisis, but as business as usual, de rigour, common place, what is, reality.

If you are a 20 year-old film and digital media student now, all you have known is commercial film screenings of Robocop or Raiders of the Lost Ark on campus, diminished appearances by edgy, outrageous visiting artists, an explosion of agents from the transnational media corporations preaching the ecstasy of free market media fun, and a limited non-profit sector that looks a little boring, a little too self-important and more than little too retro in birkenstocks and tie-dye shirts.

Who can blame these students for thinking that all that there is are menial jobs at Time Warner and Disney? Who can blame them for looking for low-end entry level transnational media jobs with high powered computers and ethernet connections so they can surf for web installation art when the boss is off to Korea hiring workers for animation maquiladoras?

For most of my students, even the word independent media has a different meaning from how I would guess most of us define it from living in it and watching it. 1981, the first year of Reagan's unraveling of the arts infrastructure, the welfare state, and federal regulatory controls of media, set in motion the intensive economic and political restructurings encircling us now. This same year also represented a significant turning point for U.S. feature-length, narrative independent cinema, for it was during this period that these films first reached larger audiences in art cinemas and festivals, culminating nearly 15 years of agitation across many different formats and genres.

Nearly two decades later, the transnational media companies and their boutique distributors raid independent media, looking for low budget work to attract new untapped audiences and large profit margins. The independent films so heralded by journalists simply function as hip upgrades adorned with tattoos, earrings and designer jeans to the old B picture system developed during the classical Hollywood studio era.

Once the elaborate rock and roll sound mixes and special effects are stripped away, it is difficult to discern many significant distinctions between "indy film" and a Hollywood studio production, because, first of all, the Hollywood studios for all intents and purposes no longer exist. Hollywood films and these independents are merely two sides of the same old/new global Hollywood: a perpetual quest for deals, dollars, and undeveloped niche markets.

RECLAIMING INDEPENDENT MEDIA

Therefore, it is vital for our field to engage in a historical reclamation project for the term independent media. We need to reroute the current commodification of the term and insist we are not a market niche. We need to revive independent media's oppositional political heritage from the anti-war, women's and civil rights movements, but we can't get stuck in the 1960s.

We need to reclaim the parts that still work and recycle them, such as the idea of a committed arts practice where the larger world outside the self matters. This should not be read as a nostalgic evocation of paradise lost, a time when politics and art and the community served the more lofty ideals of social and political revolution. Rather, we need to locate independent media and its supporting organizations within their historical legacies and their evolving futures in order to rethink how the dramatic contradictions of the new global politics, new wars, new technologies and new forms can recharge its purpose. In the transnational economic era, culture matters but differently and in new ways. Culture is no longer the place where the nation state revitalizes itself away from the instrumentality of capital. It is now the place where transnational capital defines itself. In other words, transnational capital has subsumed culture. In older formations of nation, culture was where dreams and nightmares, fantasies and realities resided. Now, these same discourses resurface as problematic sites, eruptions, disturbances.

The fronts this civil war is waged on also look different from earlier periods of independent media. Previously, radical media was defined in a series of oppositions, with independents located within alternative media against the corporate networks, a conflict pitched between the commercial and the non-commercial, between the monumental, historical sweep and breadth of public interest and the limitations of private interests.

But in the 1990s, these very oppositions that have guided the independent film community and alternative media are being dramatically altered by a dizzying myriad of changes: increased concentration across industries in telecommunications; a more fluid, layered transnational media flow; the emergence of media products and telecommunications technologies as central players in geopolitical trade negotiations like General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT); deregulation and privatization of public telecommunications across the globe; and aggressive state and federal arts defunding. Yet at the same time, the proliferation of new technologies like camcorders and digital media loosen up the borders between high and low end productions to create new, unregulated public spaces with promise.

We need to think about independent media not as Quentin Tarantino and Miramax, but as work and places which envision public space as volatile and necessary. We need to define independent media and the media arts fields as places where, to bring up Erik Barnouw again, the great pathfinder in this field, things boil over.

LAYERS OF CONTRADICTIONS

At this juncture, if you will bear with me for one more stretch, I want to offer you six layers of contradictions that I think can help us all rethink how we think about media and help us get to that boiling over point. Please allow me a few minutes here for my old, inner marxist feminist to emerge while I chart out some contradictions that I think are often in themselves repressed. I think we need to start our new thinking about these states of emergency from these contradictions, or others you may think of while I am speaking. All of these contradictions form

the sedimentary layers of the media arts field. I want to put out these ideas not as fully resolved positions but as points to open out for discussion.

CONTRADICTION NUMBER 1: THE TRANSNATIONAL VERSUS THE LOCAL

First, it is vital to not think solely in terms of nation states and national arts funding policies anymore. The nation state is morphing into a transnational nodal point for cultural capital. The media transnationals like Time Warner, Bertelsman, and Disney are larger than most nation states across the globe. They are completely unregulated. They constantly mutate to changing social and political conditions. They depend on new technologies like computers and satellites to move data and images, transmuting the relationship between space and time, sheering capital away from any location. We have most recently experienced the most intensive decade of cross-media merger activity in history, with Time-Warner-Turner reigning as the largest media company in the world. It is the new Ottoman Empire. Let us not forget that the 1989, the year of the now notorious Mapplethorpe controversy, was also the year of the Time Warner merger, the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the fall of the Berlin Wall.

In some theorists' arguments, the local has now taken on more importance as a place where difference can survive. Yet even the local is crisscrossed by the transnationals, and by the diasporas and displacements of large numbers of people. As Trinh T. Minh Ha has said, "the first world is in the third world and the third world is in the first world." The contradictions between the transnationals and the local are always laced with these diasporas.

All of this has shifted the role, function and purpose of media arts. And because the nation state is withering and morphing into some new kind of cyborg, the cultural sector no longer serves the purpose of national identity formation, an argument we in the media arts field have been making - that is, pluralizing the nation, expanding its histories-for many years. Only the nation state in its old formations needs history and culture. New transnational nation states need something else: free markets. So we need to start thinking about the relationship between the transnational and the local just to know where we are.

CONTRADICTION NUMBER 2: THE PUBLIC VERSUS THE PRIVATE

Public space is being decimated while privatization gobbles up everything. The entire globe is up for sale, privatized. In 1998, privatization breeds multiple meanings: the decline of the welfare state, the triumph of the market economy, a retreat into the self, and sitting alone at a computer rather than protesting in the streets. We are all in effect grounded, staying home alone where we can't make any trouble. We need to retake public space, wherever we are, whenever we can. In whatever is left of public space, we must delete all forms of privatization in any and all ways we can dream up: showing films for free; creating digital osterias for web surfing, eating and flirting; doing screenings of cut-and-mix images and sound in dance clubs. If Newt Gingrich, in decrying public television, can exclaim "we need to privatize it all," then we need to counter, as often and as loudly as we can: "we need to publicize it all."

CONTRADICTION NUMBER 3: COMMERCIAL CULTURE VERSUS PUBLIC ARTS FUNDING

After thirty years of film theory, I would assume we all know commercial image culture depends on turning its audience into passive consumers for commodity culture, voyeurism, and

mystification. After thirty years of independent media arts, I would assume we all know that public arts funding was designed to provide an antidote to the enervating compulsion of commerce to invigorate democracy. On the cusp of the millennium, these borders are blurry, shape-shifting, fluid. Miramax picked up *Welcome to Sarajevo*, a compelling humanist, anti-nationalist film about the ravages of the Bosnian War and the morally driven journalists who covered it. NBC and then Fox ran Michael Moore's seering news magazine series *TV Nation*. Even though it was pulled off the air, it recirculates in film festivals, video stores and classrooms. And the big bad computer companies like Microsoft have joined forces with hackers, librarians, and developing countries of the South to fight the end of the Fair Use Provision in International Copyright law.

With the National Endowment for the Arts and the National Endowment for the Humanities shells of their former robust selves, and very few foundations or agencies funding artists, the entire concept of public arts funding seems like a hallucination. Commercial, transnational media culture has invaded nearly all public arenas: grammar schools, public libraries, parks, universities, film festivals, even the most august of museums who curry favors from the Phillip Morris Company and The Gap. Our own beleaguered and sexually exposed President Clinton, an early proselytizer for the Information Superhighway, has been underwritten by the media transnationals, his largest campaign contributors. Despite the impeachment hearings, he will stay in office until Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and Michael Eisner want him out.

Instead of figuring a binary opposition between big bad corporate media and pure and holy public culture, I think we need a paradigm shift, borrowed from digital subcultures. We no longer need a position in one camp or the other. We need instead to hack into both to get, metaphorically speaking, the freeware and shareware we need to make work and show it. In other words, we need to torque everything - with wit, irony, and imagination.

CONTRADICTION NUMBER 4: ANALOG VERSUS DIGITALS/SINGLE TECHNOLOGY VERSUS CONVERGENCE

I have heard various "film" people, rhapsodizing the transcendent possibilities and beauty of celluloid above all else, proclaim, "who wants to see art on a computer screen?" Yet after their interventions, they retreat home to edit their works on Avids or Media 100s, sending e-mail around the globe to other cineastes. We must, whether we like it or not, figure out how we will, in a variety of ways, interface with digitality. It is not only inevitable, it is necessary, as digitality motors the transnational world order and reorganizes all labor.

However, the digital is not separate from material, lived worlds, analog forms, the real, or psychic traumas. As artists like Philip Mallory Jones, Reginald Woolery, Branda Miller, Muntadas, Melanie Printup Hope, and others have so astutely taught us, the analog and the digital are enfolded, wrapped into each other like a braid. These artists have also shown how the digital is not only one technology or way of thinking, but is in itself multiple, including CD ROMs, web sites, installations, chat rooms, Computer Graphics Interface (CGI), the internet.

We need to figure out how to curate and exhibit this wide, diverse range of digital work by inventing new forms of access, distribution, and exhibition for it. We need to refuse to allow it to be privatized and individualized by imagining ways to make it public and collective. For

example, museums could take out ads in local newspapers alerting the populace to artists' web sites. This move from private to public digitality is as urgent as creating cable access centers in the 1970s. It is a exciting battle, and one where media arts centers and organizations as custodians of the last public spaces can make an enormous difference: they can make computers and digitality "open to the public." Digital theorists Arthur and Marilouise Kroker have argued computers bunker us in and dumb us down.

Therefore, we need to make digitality part of our common public space. This trajectory is urgent as digital apartheid emerges. Only 25% of all US households have a modem, and those users are predominantly, white, male, and upper middle class. 90% of all the world's computers are in 15 countries of the North. The U.S. has as many phone lines as all of Asia. In Africa, some countries have only one phone line per 1000, and there are more phone lines in Manhattan than all of Africa. In the U.S. less than 40% of public libraries are wired.

In this context, media arts groups with public space, computers, CD ROM drives and web access could combine analog and digital to imagine new forms of public culture. Convergence might even change its meaning from the confluence of technologies to alliances between people. After all, I doubt that many of us are willing to dispose of 'bodytime' all together.

CONTRADICTION NUMBER 5: THE INDIVIDUAL VERSUS THE COLLECTIVE/ART VERSUS POLITICS/ ACADEMICS VERSUS PRACTITIONERS/ DESPAIR VERSUS HOPE

A whole panoply of contradictions are here that all graph the same phenomenon. Twenty years ago, many of us debated all of these issues until we drew blood. We argued violently over whether avant garde or social activist media was more political and called each other "apolitical" or "anti-art, overly realist." We argued over who was more political and courageous, theorists or artists, academics or activists, and wondered what sector held the most utopian promise.

Then, in 1981, Paper Tiger TV settled that debate by deconstructing it: their collective put scholars and activists together to create newsreels about consciousness. Feminist, queer, and racialized film and video in the 1980s created hybrid forms that rejected being only avant garde or social activist. Right now, all of U.S. shuttle daily between despair and hope: there's no money, but programmers and distributors figure out how to recycle and cut costs. There's no public space so artists take over dance clubs or alter voiceboxes in Barbie dolls or pirate commercial media images. There's no money for completely unsettling radical analysis in a 90-minute feature length film, so artists make radical web sites with activists like the McSpotlight, cyberfeminism, and digital diaspora sites. My students scrounge for old abandoned media technologies to recycle like pixelvision cameras and super-8 just so they can make work after college. As Dee Dee Halleck once told me, "anyone with two VCRs and a Blockbuster Video Store can become an artist."

Despite all of this recycled hope, I would wager that the massive privatization of our culture still conspires to make us all feel alone and even more lonely. I would suspect most media arts veterans now are thrilled to find just one or two other people who think public art matters, whether avant gardist or social activist. For those newer to the "field" like my students, these

categories from the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s matter much less than finding anyone who will tell them they are not alone and not crazy to think media means more than Miramax.

CONTRADICTION NUMBER 6: HISTORY VERSUS THE FUTURE

As a historian, I get really, really nervous when anyone talks about "History." History is usually marshalled to create the mythologies nation states use to annihilate everyone who doesn't fit. History is usually dug out of its grave when those with power-governments, academic administrators, programmers, foundations, Gingrich-need to quell the masses by erasing our collective hard drives to avoid uprisings. A summons to an immobilized and fantasized past is usually a way to preserve the future for control by the wrong people. We need instead a concept of histories in the plural, rather than a limited version of history in our field. All of these histories seem buried, and, given our states of emergency, urgently require archaeology. Film and media studies academics have spent entire careers analyzing Warner Brothers, David O. Selznick, MGM, Disney and other studies to understand the political economy of image culture. Now, more than ever, our media arts comrades need us to cross over and work with them to recover these lost, ephemeral histories, not as nostalgia for old war stories, but to see how our field was continuously formed and unsettled and contentious. As Michel Foucault, the French poststructuralist, has argued, all historical archaeology should be driven by the political questions of the present. As Jacques Derrida, the French father of deconstruction, has written, "the archive always opens out towards the future. "

To translate: radical histories always create new ways to think about and change the future. To translate again: media academics spend far too much time in the area of cultural studies analyzing commercial culture, like *The Brady Bunch*, and far too little time working with critical media emerging all around them. Writing, of course, is one way to take back some public space. To translate again: I would urge my academic colleagues in cultural studies to turn off their 50 channel cable televisions, get on down to your media arts centers to see some new work, and start writing about it.

ZONES OF CONTESTATION

In closing, let me say that I do not think it is viable to pick one side of these contradictions anymore, to argue for the virtues of collective, publicly-funded media art in public spaces that is entirely digital and local, or some such silly formulation. We must be honest that we live and work within these contradictions, linked together like hypertext on the World Wide Web. We can't get out of them. The only way to deconstruct them is to surf them and understand their oscillations as places, nodal points, if you will, where we can confront this closed down universe we live in. We need to open it up to contradictions which can be hashed out together and hack it all into something new. We need to create zones of contestation.

It seems to me, then, that our job is not to resolve these contradictions, but to let them rip, so we can invent a future that we would all want to live in. If we can do anything differently from Time Warner or Disney, it is that we can remake and reimagine and reclaim public spaces where these contradictions can be exposed in our programming, our art events, our artwork, our writing, our curating, our administering. Our collective job then is to make space where the future can be imagined, rather than sold.

No matter what, our current states of emergency demand new thinking. No matter what, our current states of emergency require the energy and courage to let these contradictions be explored and to explode. No matter what, our current states of emergency require that we summon our energy, find other people of passion, and take over some space from the privatizers. No matter what, we must reach out and create a larger community of people that crosses all kinds of borders: national, sexual, ethnic, gender, arts administrators, academics, curators, makers, analog and digital artists. No matter what, we can't get stuck in any one technology, but must pluralize them all and reimagine how to program with them.

It is only by surfing the folds of these contradictions with the passion with which we surf the Web that we will create the greatest arts funders of all: imagination and hope. It is only then that Erik Barnouw's call to action can be answered. It is only then that things will boil over.

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